

Self-expression in Facebooks' vision of a metaverse

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PREFACE

This essay will explore one of the ethical dimensions of the concept of a 'metaverse.' As a point of departure, a media study was done, analyzing nine articles from i.a. *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *De Volkskrant*, and *The New Yorker*. This media study aimed to explore the ethical issues being raised surrounding the metaverse. For a complete list, including inclusion criteria and article topics, please refer to the article list in Appendix A.

Throughout this essay, the article that will be leading points out an issue that illustrates the far going effects of the introduction of a metaverse. It also raises a meaningful ethical discussion on the metaverse that goes beyond the obvious ethical issues like privacy and regulations, namely that of self-expression.

INTRODUCTION

During a Facebook earnings call in June 2021, its CEO Mark Zuckerberg outlined the company's ambitious new vision. Facebook should become a cornerstone figure in the next best thing since mobile internet: the metaverse (Facebook, 2021).

The metaverse refers to the concept of a future iteration of the internet, made out of shared virtual spaces linked into one big virtual universe. It would span the physical and virtual worlds, contain its economy, and promises to offer 'unprecedented interoperability' (Newton, 2021).

This essay aims to identify and address one of the less obvious ethical issues around the concept of a metaverse: that of self-expression. I will first discuss an article published in *The New Yorker*, which includes a point of critique regarding self-expression in the metaverse. Subsequently, I will look at this ethical issue using Aristoteles' virtue ethics. To better understand the problem, I will then use the concept of value-sensitive design to evaluate what is needed to design for self-expression in the metaverse. Finally, I will end with a summarizing conclusion.

THE METAVERSE AND THE ISSUE OF SELF-EXPRESSION

In the article *'Facebook wants us to live in the metaverse'* by Kyle Chayka (2021), the concept of a metaverse is explained and further explored. This section will briefly summarize this work and discuss the issues the article reports on.

WHAT IS THE METAVERSE?

Chayka introduces the metaverse using its historical origin (2021). The term 'metaverse' was first coined by science-fiction writer Neal Stephenson in his novel 'Snow Crash' from 1992. In this novel, it refers to a computer-generated universe that is accessed through virtual reality glasses, Chayka says. Inside lies a sprawling avenue where the buildings and billboards represent different pieces of software that major corporations have engineered. Chayka describes how these corporations all pay the 'Global Multimedia Protocol Group' for their parcel of digital real estate, while users pay for access.

According to Chayka, Stephenson's fictional metaverse might not be far from the near-future reality that major tech companies such as Facebook are currently developing. As Zuckerberg said it, *"You're basically going to be able to do everything that you can on the Internet today as well as some things that don't make sense on the Internet today, like dancing"* (Chayka, 2021).

Technologically, the metaverse is already taking shape. Video games such as Second Life, Roblox, and Fortnite already have already shown metaverse related characteristics, becoming digital worlds where players can meet, for example, to attend an Ariana Grande concert (Chayka, 2021). Further advances in virtual reality, augmented reality, blockchain, and NFT^① technology will only increase the impressiveness and scale of the concept.

Chayka analyses, judging from Facebook's past growth strategy^② that for Zuckerberg, the metaverse is just another opportunity to establish a monopoly. *"Just as the company bought, absorbed, and outcompeted smaller social-media platforms until it resembled a monopoly, it may try to control the entire space in which users dwell so that it will be able to charge us rents,"* Chayka claims.

Based on Zuckerberg's comments and the idea of such a monopoly, Chayka fears for the state of self-expression in the metaverse. With Facebook already

① NFT stands for Non-Fundable Token and refers to a unique and non-interchangeable piece of data that is stored on a blockchain ledger.

② Facebook has grown a lot with its so-called 'buy-or-bury' strategy, where it uses its control of data to establish a control of the market.

touching on careers, relationships, and politics, he fears our self-expression will also be influenced. As Chayka frames it: *“your self-presentation online becomes a choice limited to options that Facebook provides. A blue-and-gray virtual universe looms. The more immersive it is, the more inescapable it becomes, like an all-encompassing social-media feed, with all the problems thereof”*.

WHAT ETHICAL ISSUES ARE RAISED?

The issue that Chayka raises goes beyond the more obvious worries about privacy or regulations that concepts like the metaverse often cause. Instead, it is a concern for what makes us who we are: self-expression. As self-expression is an essential human virtue, this issue is vital in discussing if and how a metaverse should be desirable and can be classified under the technology ethics principles of digital rights, autonomy, and identity (Friedman et al., 2020; Spacey, 2016).

EUDAIMONIST VIRTUE ETHICS

To further analyze the problem raised, I will discuss the work of Aristotle on virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is currently one of three major approaches in normative ethics. In contrast to emphasizing duties or rules (deontology) or the consequences of actions (consequentialism), it focuses on virtues or moral character. This essay will take Aristotle’s eudaimonist virtue ethics (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018) as a starting point.

Virtues are defined by their relationship to *eudaimonia*. This is a term that refers to living a good life, in which one develops one’s talents to become a well-being human. It is a life in which human flourishing is central. Therefore, a virtue is a trait that contributes to this flourishing and is something we should develop precisely because it does so.

REFLECTION

From this perspective, one can derive that for Aristotle, concepts like freedom, autonomy, and rationality are important virtues that are fundamental to human life. That is because these concepts are all requirements for developing the virtues that lead to human flourishing. I will argue that self-expression is so as well and that it is, therefore, vital to consider this in the discussion on if and how a metaverse should be desirable.

Self-expression is not only about expressing who you are. It is also an expression of whom you want to become and what you stand for. It is a

fundamental part of the development of the self, and therefore also key to human flourishing. In the metaverse, however, self-expression will become limited by the boundaries, rules, and limited choices that are determined by those in power^③. This makes it, from an Aristotelian perspective, undesirable.

Another issue Aristotle would have with the metaverse is that it steers individuals to develop in a one-sided way. Because of the amount of data that is collected of you in the metaverse, experiences will be tailor-made for you, creating an echo-chamber effect. This is an effect that we already see on social media platforms, in which users' beliefs are reinforced by repetition inside a closed system. Because Facebook also aims to keep you in the metaverse for as long as possible, this means one will never experience others' ideas as one would in the real world, causing a one-sided development that is not lead by ration and does not lead to human flourishing.

From these examples, we can conclude that from a virtue ethics perspective, a metaverse under the influence of Facebook is undesirable.

VALUE-SENSITIVE DESIGN

From the previous section, we have linked the problems of self-expression in the metaverse to the practices of Facebook. In this section, I want to analyze the possibility of holding human values such as the need for self-expression into account in the design of the metaverse. For this purpose, I will use Facebook as an example, and I will be using the theory of value-sensitive design (Friedman et al., 2020) for this analysis.

Value-sensitive design is a technology design approach that advocates the consideration of human values for the design of artifacts. In this approach, value-sensitive design builds on an iterative methodology that integrates three types of investigation, aimed at better understanding the following three dimensions:

- ① Empirical – who are the relevant stakeholders, and what are their priorities and values?
- ② Conceptual investigation – what are the values and value tensions?

^③ Although the concept of a metaverse could be managed decentralized, realistically, those in power are likely the ones that have the data to tailor the experiences they provide to their users best. In other words, Big tech companies such as Facebook.

- ③ Technical investigations – what are value issues raised by current technology, and how can new values be implemented into designs?

These investigations can be executed consecutively, parallel, or iteratively and are meant to be used cyclically in a technology design process.

Value-sensitive design thus provides us with the tools to incorporate human values into the design of artifacts and systems by providing a framework for an iterative design approach.

REFLECTION

Although the value-sensitive design approach is weak in analyzing the potential value conflicts in future technological advances – such as the metaverse – without empirical investigation, it can still be used to determine values and value conflicts that are present in a platform such as Facebook^④. Through the lens of value-sensitive design, this section describes a partly technical and partly conceptual investigation into the values of Facebook's current practices. As a starting point, I will be looking at the state of self-expression on its social media platform.

Facebook's mission is to '*give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together*' (Facebook, n.d.). This is a value-loaded message, that through its focus on building communities, suggests that a value such as self-expression should be important to Facebook. In practice, though, the values that do seem to be present in the platform are mostly values that Facebook itself is benefitting from. Since Facebook gains its revenue from running ads, the algorithms are finetuned on keeping users on the platform for as long as possible, by providing content that promotes this behavior (Hao, 2021).

This directly goes against the idea of empowering people and the values that are related to this, instead tending to restrict people for the sake of revenue. This shows how Facebook has a value conflict that for now been one-sidedly won by its business interest at the expense of its users. This shows, again, that Facebook would be unsuited to be a deciding influence in the development of the metaverse, and that values like self-expression are in jeopardy until something changes.

^④ For example, through a value source analysis (Friedman & Hendry, 2019).

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have looked at the ethical issue of the state of self-expression in the metaverse. The article '*Facebook wants us to live in the metaverse*' was discussed, and the concept of the metaverse and the issue of self-expression in the metaverse were explained. This has proven to be an issue that is fundamental in discussing if and how a metaverse should be desirable.

Using the Aristotelean concept of eudaimonist virtue ethics, I then analyzed the relation of the metaverse to the value of self-expression and concluded that a metaverse regulated by Big Tech would be harmful to human flourishing.

Subsequently, using value-sensitive design, a technical and conceptual investigation into the value of self-determination on the current Facebook platform was done. This showed a value conflict between Facebook's mission – under which self-expression also falls – and its business model, which is focused on using platform users as a resource for profit.

These analyses, therefore, show how a metaverse regulated by Facebook would be harmful and how a value conflict between users' values and Facebook's business model is part of the reason for this. And that – until something changes – human values such as self-expression are at stake.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – ARTICLE LIST

This appendix lists the articles that were read for writing this essay. The inclusion criteria for articles that were used are the following:

- ① The article should have the ‘metaverse’ as its main topic.
- ② The article should make a normative moral argument explaining why one or multiple aspects of the metaverse is/are good or bad.

This criterium was adopted with a broad definition of ethics: ‘*Ethics is the branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles.*’ The criterium for including a normative moral argument was used to exclude articles without a specified opinion on the ethical issue that was raised.

The articles that were reviewed mostly touch on identity, data security, and control, the role of Facebook, and the company’s intention for their interest in the metaverse. In table 1, the article list can be found.

TITLE	SOURCE
Is Facebook leading us on a journey to the metaverse?	The Guardian
How Facebook’s ‘metaverse’ became a political strategy in Washington	The Washington Post
Building the metaverse responsibly	Facebook
Are we in the metaverse yet?	The New York Times
Facebook wants to build an ambitious ‘metaverse’, but it’s full of challenges	India Times
Race, gender and representation: The grey area of the metaverse	Vogue Business
Now is the time to talk about ethics and privacy in the metaverse	Forbes
The metaverse is taking over the physical world	Interesting Engineering
The metachallenges of the metaverse	Brookings Institution

Table 1. Article list